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Evolution and Permanence of City-Countryside Views Throughout the Urban Development of a City, Madrid as a Case Study

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Abstract

The ever-changing contour of a city responds to many factors; the need to expand circumvents the geophysical limitations in an ever-lasting dialogue between the city and its surrounding countryside. The idea of trespassing this rural-urban boundary has driven architecture and urbanism to shape the city layout in a certain way throughout history. Lookouts, based on its topographic advantage, conform visual relationships that, over time, have become consolidated views, ever-changing, however part of the collective memory. Urban development plans must be especially sensitive towards these elements, for its importance lies mainly in the intangibility. Moreover in the case of those views from the roads and accesses to and from the city; these “approaching landscapes” become and everyday scenery for those experiencing the rural-urban fringe.

The purpose of this work is to study the evolution of these views in a growing city, paying special attention to the city-countryside dialogue. Madrid is chosen as the study case, as part of a funded project entitled “Proximity Landscapes of the city of Madrid. From the 19th Century to the present.” This research tackles Madrid’s urban contour and surrounding nature: an area that has been left out both by regional and local environmental studies. Through the analysis of historical cartography and other documentary evidence, we detect the areas of urban-rural friction along Madrid’s contour line in five relevant stages of the city’s development. The main conclusion drawn from this study is that lookouts from the city towards the countryside show a higher permanence, while the relevant observation points looking into the city not only move further away from the urban contour line, but proliferate as potential places from where to apprehend the iconic image of the city.

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1. Introduction

What are the limits to today's cities? The area of influence of a great metropolis overcomes political boundaries traced on the plans. The city is a landscape: a collage of elements from different times, in which the expansion of the peripheries alters the contour of a city and its relationship with the surrounding. The idea of trespassing this rural-urban boundary has existed since Renaissance, for instance with the villa-city relationship. The will to "look in" and "look out" of the city has driven architecture and urbanism to shape the city layout in a certain way. Lookouts, based on its topographical advantage, conform visual relationships that, over time, have become consolidated views, ever-changing, however part of the collective memory. Urban development plans must be especially sensitive towards these elements, for its importance lies mainly in the intangibility. Moreover, in the case of those views from the roads and accesses to and from the city, for these "approaching landscapes" become an everyday scenery for those experiencing the rural-urban fringe. From the outskirts, certain exterior observation sites allow us to see the city emerge over the greenery, with its architectural landmarks and its outline, able to configure an iconic image, recognizable and transcendent in time. Simultaneously, when we find ourselves in certain interior sites of the city, lookouts towards the countryside, we feel nostalgia for that nearby nature.

Along with a growing city comes a change in how it is perceived; the visual references can be altered, the scale can be distorted, and iconic or historical views are jeopardized. From a historical urban landscape perspective, these iconic views that remain in the collective memory are as important as the image of the historical core of the city. Landscape, as quoted in the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000) "is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere: in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas". The nature-city fringe in large cities is a sensitive area, with the potential to hold sceneries of great quality and symbolic charge.

The purpose of this research is to study the evolution of these changing views, paying special attention to the city-countryside dialogue. Madrid is chosen as the study case, as part of a funded project entitled "Proximity Landscapes of the city of Madrid. From the 19th Century to the present." This research tackles Madrid's urban contour and surrounding nature: an area that has been left out both by the regional environmental studies of the Autonomous Community and by Madrid's City Council Plan for the Quality of Urban Landscape. These spaces are usually disregarded, considered subsidiary and often unable to contribute to a pleasant image of the city.

2. Methodology

Through the analysis of historical cartography and other documentary evidence, we detect the areas of urban-rural friction along Madrid's contour line in five relevant stages of the city's development: before its first urban enlargement plan in the early 19thC, late 19thC, mid-20thC, late 20thC and the present time. This evolutionary analysis allows us to establish the possible continued existence of certain relevant observation points, witnesses of the mutual city-countryside dialogue. The historical plans used as basis for these graphical analyses are 1809 (Bentabole), 1877-81, 1940, 1976 and 2010, from the database "Planea" [1]. The starting point has been the delimitation of those contour fringes, not studied neither as natural landscape units by the regional report of the Environmental Department [2], nor as urban landscape units by the local report Plan for the Quality of Urban Landscape [3], as shown in figure 1. In this analysis, both the main roads to access the city, which provide perceptive lines of interest, as well as those places which act as lookouts towards the city, are marked.

3. Orography and the growth of the city

Medieval Madrid was perched above a rugged terrain, east of the Manzanares river course. A series of streams drained into this river, forming small dells that determined the direction of the main streets [4]. The city was enclosed by its walls up to the late 18thC; it had two defensive walls, the Arab wall (9thC) and the Christian wall (12thC), and three

taxation fences, Arrabal fence (15thC), the fence of Felipe II (1556) and that of Felipe IV (1625). This last fence girded the perimeter of Madrid up to mid-19thC, when its demolition began in order to undertake the enlargement plan, invading other hills to the east.



Fig. 1. Madrid and its surroundings (Plano de Madrid y sus contornos, B. de la Vega, H. de Obregón, J. Coello y J. Febrer, 1856, Servicio Geográfico del Ejército) and map of the areas covered by recent official landscape reports.

In the mid-20thC the city grew again, annexing new outlying rural cores (1948-1954). The urban fabric will now start to fill in the voids, except for the area covered by Casa de Campo and El Pardo Mount, Madrid's major "green lungs" and closest reference to the natural landscape of the city's northern surrounding.

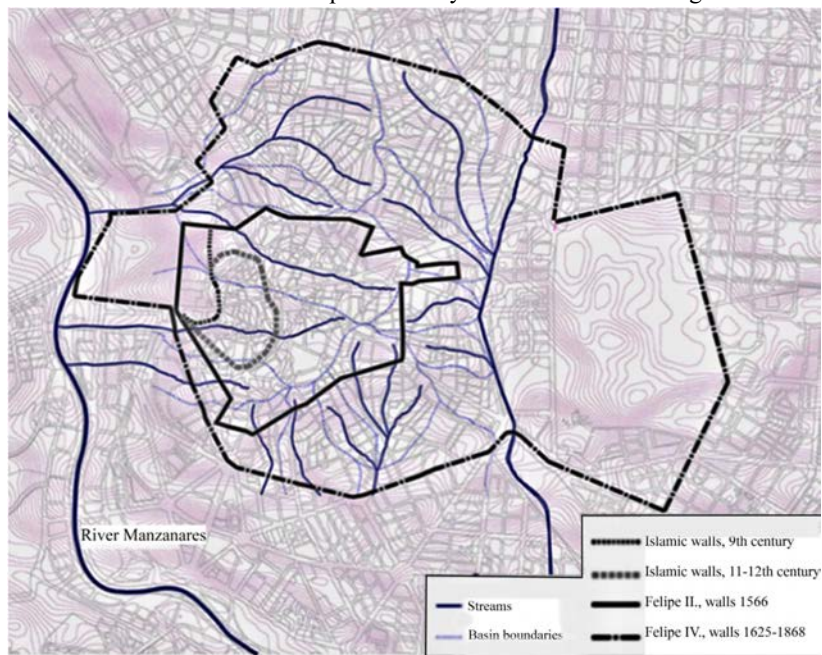


Fig. 2. Madrid topography, water basins and evolution of surrounding walls [5].

4. The urban and surrounding landscapes of Madrid

The growth of Madrid, an old town emerged around a fortress of Islamic origin, once it was named capital of Spain by Felipe II, was marked by the numerous convents and monasteries, most of them founded by the Spanish Crown itself, erected over the irregular morphology of an Islamic city, in a spontaneous, unplanned development. In the 17thC, the Alcázar was the dominant piece of the whole city. In the 18thC, the city guidelines change with the dynastic change of the Crown. The new Royal Palace was built, and important urban reforms were undertaken, especially in the periphery of the city, where new scenic spaces and buildings for public use appeared, along with tree-lined promenades and recreational areas that started a conscious search for a relationship between the sturdy urban fabric and the surrounding countryside. Throughout the 19thC, the confiscation laws resulted in open spaces to the city (creating squares and public gardens) and room for public buildings and new institutions, in line with the taste of the new bourgeoisie. The enlargement plan and numerous internal reforms gradually changed and modernized the urban landscape of Madrid.

Regarding the surroundings of the city, 16th and 17thC-Madrid had numerous orchards in the urban contour, but one could also find them inside the walls, as reflected in historical cartography, chronicles, stories of the city and travel books [6]. This humanized nature penetrated the city in the shape of orchards and gardens, providing it with a traditional city character, closely linked to the surrounding countryside and with a very peculiar landscape [7]. Key to the configuration of the peri-urban landscape were the great number of country houses that appeared in the surroundings, along the main roads, especially in certain rural cores near the “Villa de Madrid” [8,9]. Some existed since the 16thC, though they proliferated mainly throughout the 19thC. These country houses, usually of a productive origin, played a very important role as recreational spaces. But above all, their importance lied in their role as elements which structured the surrounding territory of the city, and the architectural design of their buildings as lookouts towards the city. Suburban villas cannot be understood without the city [10]. As important was the fact that from the city one could contemplate a beautiful countryside, as the fact that from the country houses one could master the splendid views of the metropolis, in a game of mutual nostalgias.

During the reigns of Fernando VI, Carlos III and Carlos IV, bridges and monumental gates were built in the perimeter of the city, as well as tree-lined promenades in the proximity of the river, designed for the population’s recreation and aiming to confer a monumental look to the accesses to city. This meant putting value, for the first time, in the city’s exterior image. The restocking and lining of the urban greenery in the contour starts to be regulated, as a seed for the future 19thC transformations.

In the times of Fernando VII, Oriente and Armería Squares are created, the viaduct of Bailén Street is erected and the “cuesta de la Vega” is designed, creating a visual connection along the “cornice” from the Royal Palace to the San Francisco el Grande Basilica. In the same way, works of improvement in the Royal Sites around the capital were undertaken, the channelling of the river was started and the exterior promenades were dignified, with the planning of both the Pirámides roundabout to the south and Fuente Castellana Avenue to the north.

The south area outside the walls would be strongly altered with the installation of railway stations from mid-19thC onwards, with the bypass that linked them, which would start to be surrounded by warehouses and industrial premises. Meanwhile, to the east, from 1832 onwards, the Fuente Castellana Avenue would be set up as a vertebral axis for the future growth of the city [11].

In the preliminary project for Madrid’s enlargement plan, Carlos M^a de Castro in 1857 would be the first to propose the transformation of the peripheral Castellana promenade in the main entrance to the city from the north, extending blocks of the enlargement plan in a half-crown shape to north and east of the city. This idea would be picked up later by Zuazo and Jansen in the International Competition of 1929, where they proposed a north-south axis to structure the city of today.

5. The contour areas and lookouts, evolution in the cartography

In terms of landscape, the most interesting aspects of Madrid are the rugged topography of the nearby surrounding, as well as the steep cut of the River Manzanares, with the so called “cornice of Madrid” as a welcoming façade of the city for those who approached it from the northwest. A broad mass of trees provided by El Pardo Mount, Casa de Campo, Campo del Moro, Florida Avenue and the riversides shaped a green carpet below that cornice, defined by the great mass of the Royal Palace and the powerful dome of San Francisco el Grande Basilica, over an enchanting silhouette of smaller domes and towers of the numerous churches that populated the city. This is the iconic image of Madrid, and has been represented from the right riverbank by uncountable artists.

We have detected the main promontories, acting as lookouts, in several phases of the growth of the city since the early 19thC till today. When locating them respect to the city, we highlight those from where the angle of vision allows for an integral perception of the whole extension of the city.

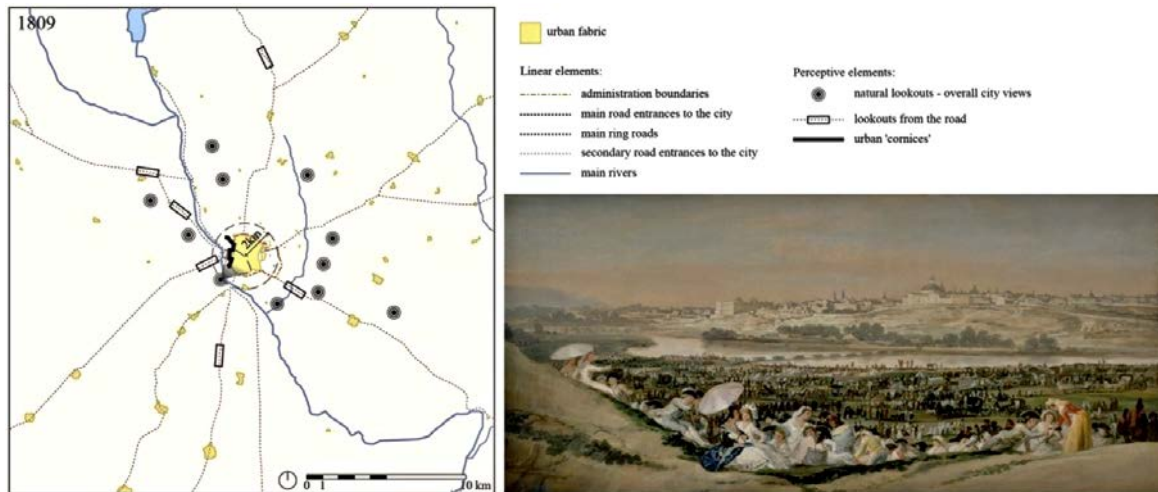


Fig. 3. Map of Madrid in 1809 and painting entitled “La Pradera de San Isidro”, by Francisco de Goya, 1788.

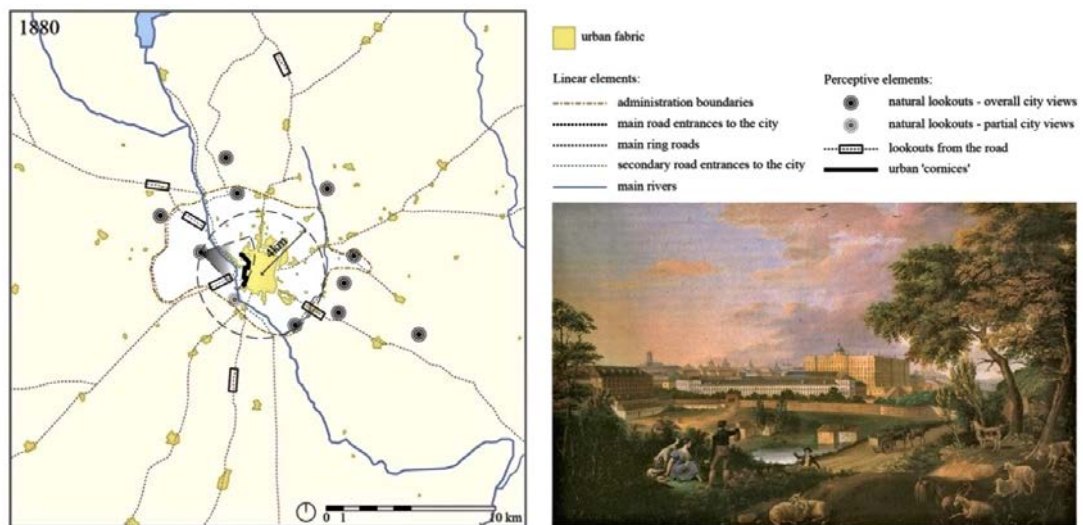


Fig. 4. Map of Madrid in 1880 and painting entitled “Vista del Palacio Real desde la Montaña de Príncipe Pío”, by José María Avrial, 1836.

Madrid had not yet vastly expanded respect to its historical boundaries, the last one being the fence of Felipe IV. This entails that, up to the end of 19thC, the lookouts marked in the cartography of figures 3 and 4 offered an overall image of the city. The most representative views of the city, found in numerous paintings, was from the west and south-west promontories looking towards the architectural landmarks conforming the urban “cornice”.

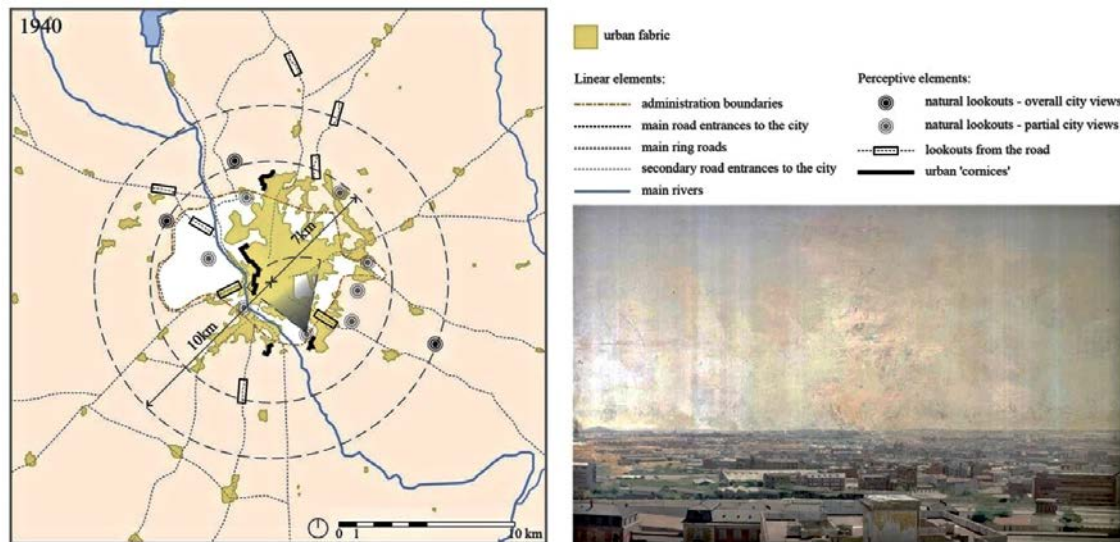


Fig. 5. Map of Madrid in 1940 and painting entitled “Madrid Sur”, by Antonio López, 1965-85.

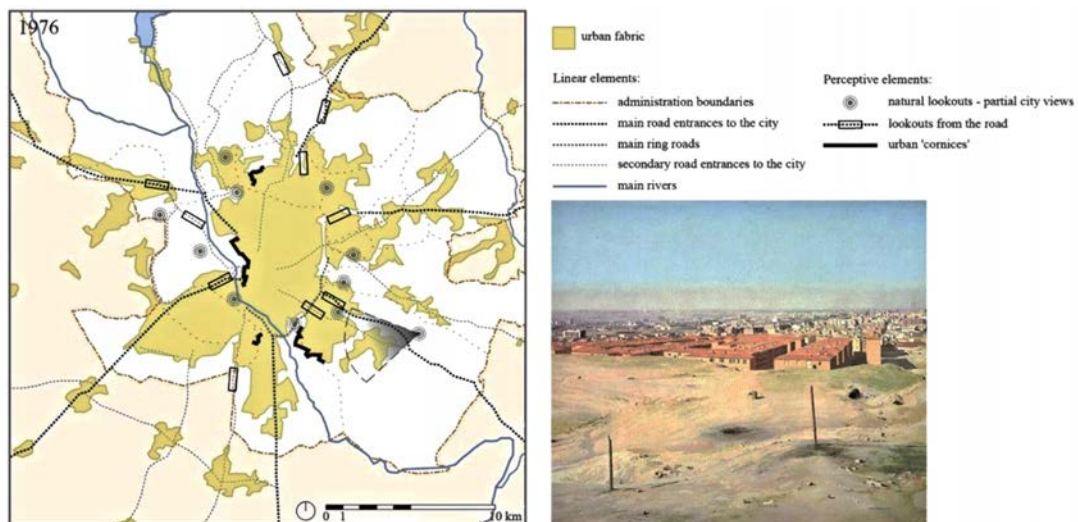


Fig. 6. Map of Madrid in 1976 and painting entitled “Madrid. Barrio de Vallecas”, by Isabel Quintanilla, 1981.

Due to the great expansion of the urban fabric during the 20thC, the lookouts closer to the city centre now provide a limited, partial vision. We can see how artists now offer new viewpoints, covering the east and south-east face of the city; a side which had been formerly disregarded. The choice of this new visual repertoire came sideways with a social consciousness linked to ordinary landscapes.



Fig. 7. Map of Madrid in 2010 and panoramic photograph of the city from the outskirts, taken in 2009, [12].

6. Conclusions

Madrid strongly changed its image, first with the bourgeois expansion of the 19thC, and moreover after the Civil War in the 20thC. However, traces of old agricultural spaces and gardens remain, as well as snippets not yet resolved of the clash between successive concentric urban growths. The surrounding landscape has evolved throughout this process, but Madrid's geographical and topographical situation still provides views of great interest in its contour.

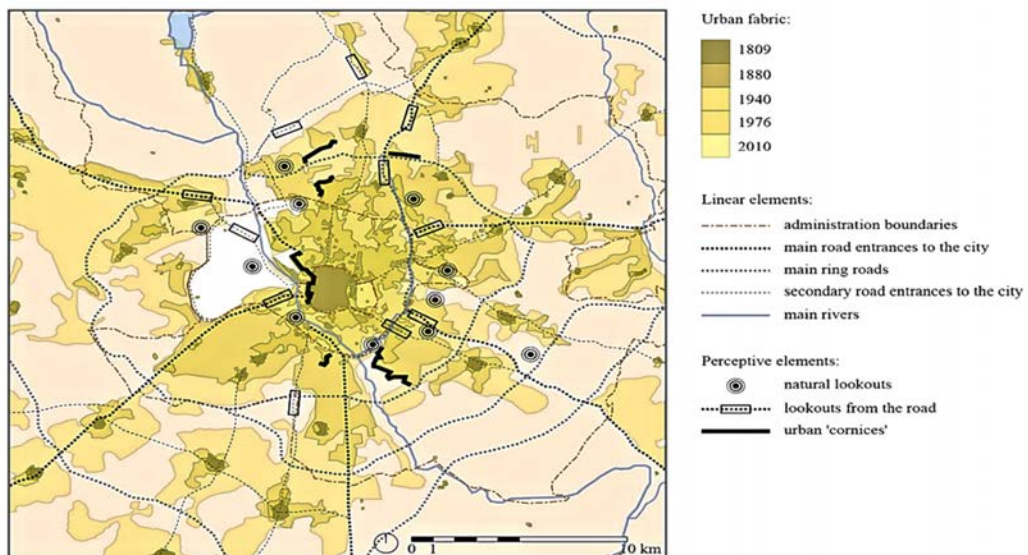


Fig. 8. Evolution of the urban fabric of Madrid since the early 19thC to today.

It was never a fluvial city; Manzanares lacked the entity to have determined the foundation of the city, but the orography it created has conditioned the urban image and growth of Madrid from the very beginning. The main paths

leading to Madrid, and those linking it with outlying towns, have existed for a long time and are fundamental structural elements for the surrounding landscape. Even today, many of these accesses constitute places from which to observe the city when one is approaching it.

The observation points of the city from its nearby area, as well as the places that act as lookouts over the surrounding countryside, are relevant witnesses of the city's history. They constitute important permanent elements for the building of urban memory, but their frontier location makes them fragile, ever-changing, and should be known in depth in order for new urban enlargement plans to respect them as images of the urban historical landscape, worthy of being preserved.

The main conclusion drawn from this study is that lookouts from the city towards the countryside show a higher permanence, while the relevant observation points looking into the city not only move further away from the urban contour line, but proliferate as potential places from where to apprehend the iconic image of the city. The visual references have changed, as well as the scale of the city and its extension and influence on the territory. The new symbol for the traveller or inhabitant who approaches the city is no longer the whiteness of the Royal Palace over the surrounding trees and the steep terrain of the river, but the dominant silhouette of the four towers of the Castellana in the distance, marking the north cardinal over an extension of buildings that descends towards the south, tracing a soft outline that changes with the light and the sharpness of the air.

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